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Commentary

Reconsidering Hilberseimer's Chicago

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Abstract

The German architect and urbanist Ludwig Hilberseimer spent the second half of his career as an internationally influential urbanist, author, and educator while living and working in Chicago. The city of Chicago provided both context and content to inform his theories of planning the American city. While in Chicago, Hilberseimer taught hundreds of students, authored dozens of publications, and conceived of his most significant and enduring professional projects. Yet, in spite of these three decades of work on and in Chicago, the relationship between Hilberseimer's planning proposals and the specific urban history of his adopted hometown remains obscure. This commentary reconsiders the role that Chicago played in Hilberseimer's work as well as the impact that his work had on the planning of the city.

Keywords

decentralization; economic order; regional pattern; settlement unit; urban renewal

Issue

This commentary is part of the issue "Territories in Time: Mapping Palimpsest Horizons" edited by Chiara Cavalieri (UCLouvain, Belgium) and Elena Cogato Lanza (EPFL, Switzerland).

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Ludwig Hilberseimer spent the second half of his career living and working in Chicago. The city provided both context and content for Hilberseimer's internationally significant urban planning theories. In the three decades following his arrival in Chicago in 1938, Hilberseimer taught hundreds of students, authored numerous publications, and developed his most significant planning projects. Despite nearly thirty years of work on and in Chicago, the relationship between Hilberseimer's planning proposals and the form of the city remains obscure. In spite of the international influence of his ideas and his decades-long campaign for Chicago's replanning, Hilberseimer ultimately had little impact on the form of the city (Danforth, 1993, p. 70). While his reputation as an educator and urbanist grew during his long career, Hilberseimer himself denied that he had made any discernable difference in the planning of the city of Chicago: "There is nothing in this city that reflects my planning" (Danforth, 1988, p. 12). While he made little contribution to the shape of the city, Hilberseimer developed his planning proposals for Chicago by reading the city's existing

gridiron structure as a palimpsest, erasing it completely in his earliest projects, and adapting an incremental and incomplete erasure in later works.

Rather than a site for the realization of his ideas at scale, Hilberseimer's Chicago offered a set of geographic and demographic conditions for his rethinking of the American city in the terms of economic determinism. Hilberseimer's mature planning theories derived spatial order from principles of industrial economy. These principles stand in sharp contrast to the history of regional planning based in geological determinism, as advocated by Patrick Geddes, Benton MacKaye, and Ian McHarg. This reading of Hilberseimer's economic determinism as spatial order is evident in his post-war plans for Chicago, his numerous English-language publications on planning the contemporary city, and his proposals for the redesign of the Marquette Park and Hyde Park neighborhoods in Chicago.

Beginning with his arrival in 1938, Hilberseimer drew upon the specific conditions of his new city to support his teaching and research. Chicago's neighborhoods and

territorial extents informed his Socratic method of teaching. He developed original spatial, geographic, climatological, economic, societal, and demographic readings of the city. He also began to recruit students to embark upon self-commissioned research projects focused on the replanning of Chicago. These drawings were often the work of students enlisted to imagine the radical spatial restructuring of the entire metropolitan region, an area of several thousand square miles. Among these students was the landscape architect Alfred Caldwell. The drawings that Caldwell completed illustrate a Chicago metropolitan region in which the economic order of decentralized industry—a dispersed pattern of industrial organization—is realized at the territorial scale in relation to larger geological and ecological systems shaping the distribution of transport infrastructure.

These images (see Figure 1) postulate the reordering of Chicago's urban fabric toward small, walkable "settlement units," imagined as neighborhood enclaves insulating populations from automobile traffic in a distributed network of public parks and gardens. These drawings foreground how economic and ecological factors were transformed into the spatial determinates of Hilberseimer's radically revised urban order. The princi-

ples of this new order did not derive from a detailed study of Chicago; rather, they preceded his exile entirely. The planning principles and intellectual commitments that underpinned Hilberseimer's reimagining of Chicago were formed in the context of the first half of his life in Germany, and they remained remarkably consistent throughout his career on both sides of the Atlantic, from the 1930s in Berlin to the 1960s in Chicago.

In 1943, Hilberseimer was invited to curate an ambitious exhibition on planning for the post-war future at the Art Institute of Chicago. He was only the third architect to be granted an individual exhibition at the Art Institute, following Frank Lloyd Wright in 1930, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in 1938 (Colman, 2014). The resulting exhibition, "The City: Organism & Artifact," opened in October 1944 and was cosponsored by a coalition of organizations, such as the Chicago chapter of the American Institute of Architects, the Illinois Institute of Technology, and the University of Chicago's Division of Social Sciences. The exhibition was widely covered in the popular and professional press and elevated Hilberseimer's visibility and status in Chicago planning circles.

The exhibition was accompanied by an extensive lecture series shared across the Art Institute and University



Figure 1. The city in the landscape: Ludwig Hilberseimer, planner, with Alfred Caldwell, delineator, 1942. Courtesy of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal, Gift of Alfred Caldwell.

of Chicago. The program gathered an impressive roster of speakers, including historians, sociologists, economists, political scientists, planners, and architects. Several lectures featured the work of University of Chicago sociologists Louis Wirth and Robert Park. At the peak of his influence in Chicago, Hilberseimer remained an economic determinist committed to delineating the spatial and architectural order of the city during the decades when American planning decisively turned toward the political and social sciences as embodied by the Chicago School (Carriere, 2012; Colman, 2014). In an era when policy and planning moved toward describing urban conditions through empirical observation, data, and mapping, Hilberseimer's resolute commitment to spatial order as an expression of social order rendered his large-scale visions for Chicago as abstract and apparently totalizing. The exhibition and lecture series were accompanied by the simultaneous publication of Hilberseimer's first English-language book on planning, *The New City: Principles of Planning* (Hilberseimer, 1944). Based on the positive reception of the exhibition and publication, Hilberseimer was invited to consult the newly formed South Side Planning Board as it considered the renewal of that portion of the city after the war.

When Hilberseimer moved to Chicago, he brought with him a lifelong commitment to socialist principles of equity. He arrived as a middle-aged European intellectual with a mature vision for shaping the contemporary city. But there was little in Hilberseimer's education or experience that would have prepared him for the politics of urban renewal and race in the United States. Moreover, he was either incapable of, or unwilling to engage in the realpolitik of Chicago's planning and development culture, and resolute in his refusal to compromise the clarity of his ideas. Mies famously remarked of his longtime colleague's stubborn refusal to compromise with Chicago planners and developers: "With Hilbs you take everything or nothing. And these people don't want that." (Danforth, 1988, p. 13). The politics of urban renewal in mid-century Chicago were complex, and Hilberseimer's lack of either political will or savvy all but ensured that his ideas were often lost in the shuffle of committee discussions. Nevertheless, his involvement in the redevelopment of Chicago's South Side demonstrates Hilberseimer's limited capacity to influence decision-making in a complex planning apparatus guided by empirical data and social science (Harrington, 1988).

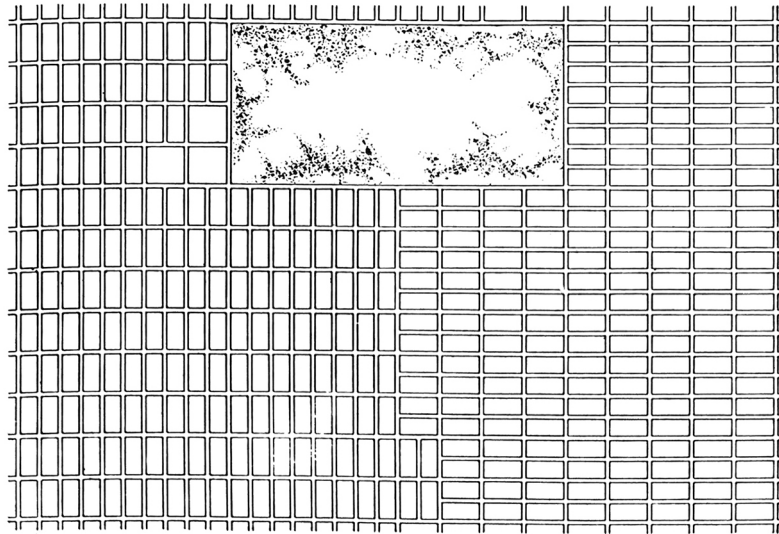
Hilberseimer published his second major English-language book on planning in 1949. *The New Regional Pattern* built upon *The New City: Principles of Planning* and restated his principles of planning while republishing several key diagrams and drawings. In contrast to the latter, the 1949 publication is explicitly regional and national in scope, focusing on the infrastructural networks, geological determinates, and ecological potentials of Hilberseimer's decentralized urban order. Chicago continued to play a role as context for some of this work yet,

given the territorial scale of natural ecology and industrial ecology, the city proper was far less significant in the formulation of *The New Regional Pattern*. With this publication, Hilberseimer returned to his rhetorical strategy of empirical diagnosis followed by an ambitious prescription for future replanning.

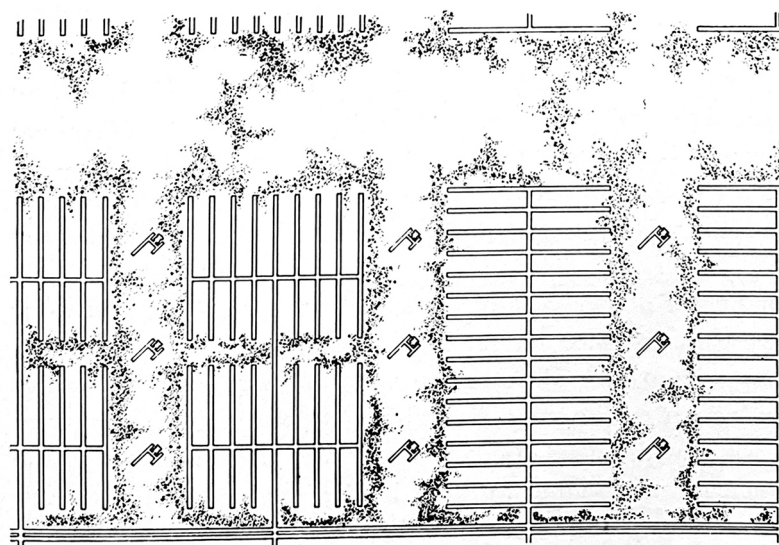
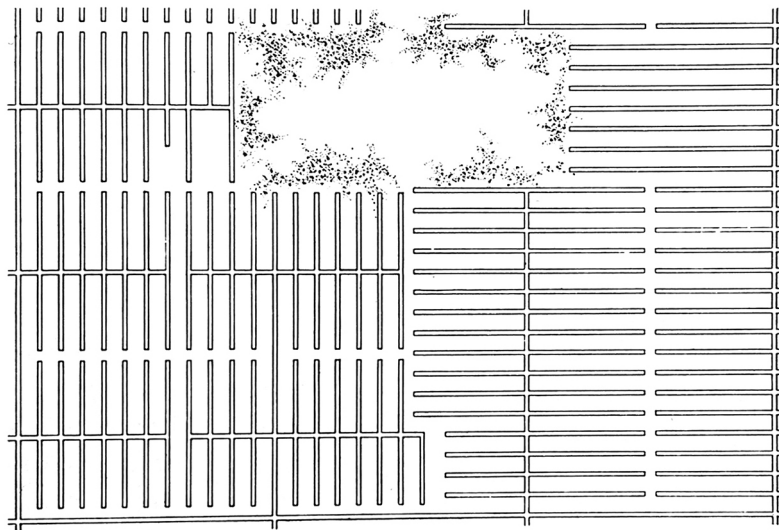
Following on *The New Regional Pattern*, Hilberseimer continued to advocate for the replanning of Chicago, and was increasingly engaged in individual projects in Chicago. These undertakings were primarily, although not exclusively, associated with sites on the South Side, developing in the wake of urban renewal (Harrington, 1988, pp. 79–80; Heald, 1949; Rich, 1949; South Side Planning Board, 1946, 1947, 1948, 1949). They are characterized by Hilberseimer's interest in deriving an incremental approach to his transformational replanning. In contrast to his city—and territorially-scaled planning diagrams of totalizing spatial order, these projects are more tactical and measured, presented in discrete stages of work, and best described as processes of editing extant portions of the nineteenth century street grid. Two examples of this kind of experimental incrementalism can be found in Hilberseimer's projects for Marquette Park (c. 1950) and his involvement in the South Side Planning Board's (1952) *Community Appraisal Study: Report on Housing and Social Survey* (see also Hilberseimer, 1949).

In the early 1950s, Hilberseimer began an academic exercise focused on the incremental replanning of the Marquette Park neighborhood in southwest Chicago. This study concerned the restructuring of the existing residential street grid surrounding the park. Hilberseimer's proposal describes two stages of alterations illustrated in a set of plan drawings (see Figure 2). Through this incremental approach, Hilberseimer offered a patient method of urban redevelopment, vastly distinct from the disruptive techniques being implemented elsewhere in Chicago (Hilberseimer, 1949, pp. 226–227; Spaeth, 1988, p. 62).

The *Community Appraisal Study: Report on Housing and Social Survey*, coordinated by the South Side Planning Board between 1950–1952, proposed a range of alternative approaches to redevelopment in the city. Considering an area of more than four square miles, or slightly greater than half of the Board's full planning area, the study was largely conducted by student teams under the leadership of eminent planning professors, including Martin Meyerson of the University of Chicago, Walter Gropius and Reginald Isaacs of Harvard University's Graduate School of Design, and Hilberseimer at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Although the Board's planning concerns were specific to Chicago, the South Side Planning Board's report offered a range of general techniques that could be reproduced elsewhere (Harrington, 1988, pp. 81–88). Two characteristics of the IIT team's redevelopment plan presented clear, iterative developments on the principles derived from the earlier Marquette Park proposal. First, a phased redevelopment plan, and second, the tactical restructuring of the extant street grid. Neither of these approaches was in



207. CHICAGO MARQUETTE PARK and *Two Proposals*



227

Figure 2. “Chicago Marquette Park and Two Proposals,” 1955. Source: Hilberseimer (1955a, p. 227).

itself novel, but what is unique to their appearance in this study is the fact that they are deployed at the scale of the city.

The Nature of Cities, Hilberseimer's third and final major, English-language planning book, appeared in 1955. As with both *The New City: Principles of Planning* and *The New Regional Pattern*, this third publication was followed by a spate of planning projects evincing Hilberseimer's principles. Among these, Hilberseimer's collaboration with Mies and developer Herbert Greenwald on a pair of urban redevelopment projects in Detroit (1955–1956) and Chicago (1956–1959) offer a compelling pair of contrasts (Hilberseimer, 1955b). The team of Greenwald, Mies, and Hilberseimer developed the scheme for Chicago's Hyde Park neighborhood in 1956 following directly upon the success of their work in Detroit's Lafayette Park, but their design is not wholly reducible to the terms of the Detroit project. One significant difference concerned the status of the site: The Hilberseimer plan for Hyde Park was submitted as an alternative to a plan already put forth by the city's Land Clearance Commission, the government body authorized to clear urban land for redevelopment by eviction, eminent domain, and other procedures. Rather, the Hyde Park plan had more in common with the approach developed for Marquette Park several years prior (Hilberseimer, 1955a; Mertins, 2004, 2013; Spaeth, 1988, pp. 62–66).

In the last decade of his life, Hilberseimer received a flurry of awards in recognition of a long career in architecture and planning. The most significant of these, a "Citation for Planning and Teaching," was granted to him by the Chicago Plan Commission in December 1964. The award left Hilberseimer puzzled and embarrassed: If the Commission truly saw it fit to commend his ideas, why had they always resisted their implementation (Danforth, 1988, p. 12)? In spite of his nearly three decades of internationally renowned work imagining the future of Chicago, Hilberseimer left behind little trace of his efforts as evident in the shape of the city.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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